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Research as Conversion

Richard M. Liddy

Knowledge makes a bloody entrance
—Aristotle

Years ago, during doctoral studies, a number of my companions experienced very difficult times. So did I. For the life of the doctoral student is often one of lonely afternoons, slow progress, dead ends and unexpected interruptions. Just persevering in research can be a very difficult process. So why does knowledge make a “bloody entrance?” Why the pain?

This paper does not presume to chart all the elements in this assault on our animal being that takes place through years of intense study. But I do want to indicate that the process of research itself involves radical turns – perhaps a number of them. Consequently, in this article I would like to: 1) reflect on the academic vocation of “research” and the implicit conversion from previously accepted assumptions that it entails; 2) take as my exemplar the great writer on cities and the environment, Jane Jacobs; 3) reflect on the implicit intellectual conversion such conversions entail; 4) call attention to “the habits of mind” genuine research entails; 5) point to the work of Simone Weil on the “attention” needed for genuine research; and finally, 6) quote Teilhard de Chardin on the need for patience in research.

1. Meaning

One of the core tenets of Bernard Lonergan’s philosophy – and indeed of classical philosophy – is “the intelligibility of being.” In other words, we would not search, we would do no “research,” we would not question, if we did not initially have the fundamental assumption that ultimately “the whole thing hangs together.” There are answers to questions – even if sometimes the answer is that we have to refine our questions. Life is meaningful.

Of course, “getting somewhere” often takes a long time. Even our discovery that our particular question is meaningless or put the wrong way is a step in the right direction. When in the course of our research we say, “How can I have been so stupid as to have thought this? By that very realization we are heading in the right direction. Such realizations, such refinements of our questions, help us to arrive at deeper questions that do lead somewhere. Our minds are made for reality.

A religious sister once told me that she was traveling on a bus in the outback of Australia – a long ride into the bush – and as she traveled she reflected on Lonergan’s thesis on the “isomorphism” or similarity of form between the structure of our knowing and the structure of what we seek to know. The physicist’s mind seeks the basic structures of physical reality. The biologist seeks the structures of organic life. Suddenly she had the insight: “Our minds are made for reality!” This is who we are! Not just our minds on the level of sensation and imagination, but our minds as capable of questioning, of having insights, as sticking to a research project no matter where it leads – even to the outback of Australia.

Isaac Newton is an example of someone who stuck to his questioning for long periods of time – until he came up with something. People brought food to his room and left it by his door, only to return hours later to find the food untouched. His spirit fed on something deeper.

Every day for many years a little old man was seen going to the British Museum to research and to write. That man's name was Karl Marx. Bernard Lonergan once remarked that Christianity would not have lost so many of the working class in the twentieth century if she also had had a little old man in the nineteenth century going every day to the British Museum to research and to write on the structures of the economy.

Lonergan highlights this deep desire within the human person to get to the bottom of things.

Deep within us all, emergent when the noise of other appetites is stilled, there is a drive to know, to understand, to see why, to discover the reason, to find the cause, to explain. Just what is wanted, has many names. In what precisely it consists, is a matter of dispute. But the fact of inquiry is beyond all doubt. It can absorb a man. It can keep him for hours, day after day, year after year, in the narrow prison of his study or his laboratory. It can send him on dangerous voyages of exploration. It can withdraw him from other interests, other pursuits, other pleasures, other achievements. It can fill his waking thoughts, hide from him the world of ordinary affairs, invade the very fabric of his dreams. It can demand endless sacrifices that are made without regret though there is only the hope, never a certain promise, of success.¹

Everyone who has done research has tasted this desire. When was it first tasted? In childhood? On a slow summer day when there was nothing else to do but read a book?² Jerome Miller writes of a young girl as she peers for the first time into a telescope:

One look through the eye of a telescope may be all it takes for a child to become an astronomer in her heart – if the glimpse of the stars it offers her makes her feel like she has been given access to an inexhaustibly fascinating world in comparison with which her ordinary world suddenly seems not just uninteresting but insubstantial.³

Who knows where we are going when we are young? We set out on paths of exploration. Something beckons us, attracts us, “calls us.” Perhaps some aspects of that attraction lay in the gene pool, the long and mysterious emergence of the universe and of our self within the universe. Perhaps the attraction lit up when we happened upon a particularly influential mentor who opened up for us worlds we never knew existed. He or she “limned” the shape of the universe for us.

In one of his essays Lonergan writes of “the passionateness of being.” Somehow, in some way, the billion year old-universe with its countless elements and teeming physical, chemical and biological processes - somehow this whole incalculable mass and momentum has arrived at - ourselves. Evolutionary process has arrived at conscious persons who can wonder at and catch glimmers of this eon-old process. In our minds the universe can become “luminous;” and we can wonder at our own power to wonder and to bring to light these “wonder-full” aspects of the universe. And we can wonder about a mind beyond our minds, and about a truth beyond the limited truths we seek; and about a personal goodness beyond ourselves and the universe.⁴

2. Jane Jacob's “Messy” Method

In a celebrated passage Aristotle granted that his ideal of the theoretic life was too high for man and that, if one lived it, one would do so not as a man but as having something divine present within one. Nonetheless he went on to urge us to dismiss those that would have us resign

Ourselves to our mortal lot. He pressed us to strive to the utmost to make ourselves immortal and to live out what was finest in us. For that finest, though slight in bulk, still surpassed by far all else in power and in value.⁵

The roads to research are manifold, but it would seem that it always unfolds in questioning leading to insight. The pieces fall together in a coherent and perhaps even beautiful way. Regularly this takes place after a particularly long and difficult journey. As Aristotle put it, “learning makes a bloody entrance.” Jane Jacobs, marvelous researcher and writer on cities, once described her method of searching.

Here is what I do. When I start exploring some subject, I hardly know what I think. I’m just trying to learn anything I can about it. Rather than reading systematically, which is possible only if you know what you want, I read as omnivorously as I can manage, in anything that interests me. I often don’t even know why I’m interested in some facet or other, and all I can say about this is that from experience I’ve learned to trust myself when I’m interested.⁶

Could it be that deep down on some primal level she presumes there are answers? She basically trusts these semi-conscious dream-like suggestions, and follows where they lead.

The experience from which I’ve learned that is being interested but saying to myself, “no, no, come off it, stop wasting time, this is beside the point,” and then learning much later, as I begin to put things together, that it wasn’t beside the point at all and my subconscious, or something, was trying to tell me something.

She describes the emergence of insight, reflective understanding and judgment.

As I read, and also notice things concretely, patterns from this information begin to form in my mind. Also, I learn that what I thought originally was “the subject” is not necessarily the subject, or is only an alley or side shoot of it – that there is a lot else to it, or underneath it. So I make outlines as I go along, but they keep changing, and what I end up with bears little relation – or relation only in small part – to what I was starting with...

She evaluates this whole process.

Very messy. This is also very uncomfortable. I don’t like all this confusion. I only keep at it because, hard and uncomfortable though it is, it is worse to stay in such confusion. I tend to think: I would never have gotten into this if I knew what I was getting into, but then it’s too late.

Discerning judgment is at work.

Back to the patterns. They begin to show up, of their own accord, just out of the material itself. I am very suspicious of them. I try to find stuff to disprove them, and when they don’t hold up, I discard them. Often in doing so, I learn something else, so the process, while disappointing – hey, it sounded like a great idea but it wasn’t – is not wasted...

If a pattern or an idea holds up, instead, and further exploration or examples, insofar as they appear, only reinforce and amplify it, then I begin to trust it, although I keep on the lookout for contradictions...

Somehow beauty is part of this whole process.

While I'm not an artist, I do feel bound to try, as far as I am able, to produce a work of art as well as a piece of truth – and one thing about a work of art is that it conceals, rather than parades, the laboriousness that went into it which was, after all, nothing but the work in its service.

But as you see, I've no magic or great enlightenment to explain, rather just messy, muddy work, which I'm inclined to think that thinking maybe usually is. If somebody could tell me how to go about it more neatly and quickly and efficiently, and still make it work, oh would I be grateful.⁷

3. Intellectual Conversion

We began by recalling Bernard Lonergan's teaching on the intelligibility of being, of all that is, underpinning our own drive to know. But Lonergan also emphasizes that there can be key moments in this process and one of those moments is when we become convinced that the process itself is worth while. He calls this "self-appropriation" or "the appropriation of one's rational self-consciousness," or simply "intellectual conversion."

Such a conversion is really a conversion to our own minds, to our own selves as not just a bundle of drives but essentially as a luminous drive for being. It is a move out of the "reification" of reality and of ourselves into the light of being. It can be exemplified in the life of Augustine of Hippo who, in the spring of 386, after years of searching among various philosophies, began to read "a few books of the Platonists" lent to him by an acquaintance. In these books he found an invitation to go within himself. "Being admonished by all this to return to myself, I entered into my own depths..."⁸ And what he discovered within himself was more than he could imagine. In fact, he found that his desire to imagine reality was at the basis of his many previous intellectual mistakes.

My mind was in search of such images as the forms of my eye was accustomed to see; and I did not realize that the mental act by which I formed these images, was not itself a bodily image.⁹

Many years separate St. Augustine from modern science but modern science itself witnesses to this need to break free from the fetters of illusory images.

St Augustine of Hippo narrates that it took him years to make the discovery that the name "real" might have a different connotation from the name "body." Or, to bring the point nearer home, one might say that it has taken modern science four centuries to make the discovery that the objects of its inquiry need not be imaginable entities moving through imaginable processes in an imaginable space-time. The fact that a Plato attempted to communicate through his dialogues, the fact that an Augustine eventually learnt from the writers whom, rather generically, he refers to as Platonists, has lost its antique flavor and its apparent irrelevance to the modern mind. Even before Einstein and Heisenberg it was clear enough that the world described by scientists was strangely different from the world depicted by artists and inhabited by men of common sense. But it was left to twentieth-century physicists to envisage the possibility that the objects of their science were to be reached only by severing the umbilical cord that tied them to the maternal imagination of man.¹⁰

Such a transformation takes place in historical research. We had been going down one road of research and suddenly we begin to suspect that there is no outlet in this direction. A medieval researcher took it for granted that “Pseudo-Dionysius” was a contemporary of Saint Paul. After all, this identification had been taken for granted by writers for centuries. Then a medieval researcher realized, “How could this be? He quotes Plotinus who lived centuries after Saint Paul!” Immediately things begin to fall into place and historians began to get closer to the historical origins of Pseudo-Dionysius.

Historical research consists of many such “inverse insights” – the awareness that we have been mistaken, that our questions themselves involved faulty assumptions. Suddenly we say to ourselves, “How could I have been so stupid as to have thought this? Reality is beckoning me in another direction.”¹¹ A major thrust of Bernard Lonergan’s own work is to help people become familiar with these “little conversions” and through such conversions begin to break their bondage to imagination as the mediator of reality. Such a discovery is “startling” and “strange.” It is a discovery that has to be appropriated and lived out in one’s life. Of that breakthrough Lonergan writes: “one has not made it yet if one has no clear memory of its startling strangeness.”¹²

4. Habits of the Mind

A research project...is a lifetime affair; and only those who put their whole lives into it get anywhere. The assumption behind tenure is that being an academic is a vocation. The assumption behind abolition is that there are no vocations for anyone any more.
(Nicholas Boyle)¹³

In the face of Margaret Thatcher’s threat to abolish tenure in the English universities, the Cambridge historian, Nicholas Boyle, contended that tenure was a direct contradiction to the principle of functional efficiency, so dominant in contemporary life. Tenure witnesses to the power and validity of unfettered human intelligence against the demands of immediacy.

How to live out this conviction that the pure desire to know is worth following? that understanding and judging head us beyond imagination into “the real world?” How sustain such a conviction and live out such a quest? Certainly there is need for “habits of the mind” as well as habits of the heart to support one’s quest.

Joseph Pieper once wrote a text, well-known at the time, entitled *Leisure: the Basis of Culture*. Pieper’s point is that civilization and higher culture depend on the ability of people to take time out from the struggle for existence to ask long-term questions, to follow out leads. In order to do this one has to *listen* and discern the movement that would call us to greater life away from the distractions that deaden our spirits. An ethics of authenticity, of listening from the depths of one’s being, leads us to avoid distractions and to be obedient to the deep call we find within our selves. It leads us to our vocation. Is it to be a writer? A teacher? A scholar? To research in this area or in that? What is calling us? What has touched us so deeply that it is worth giving our life for it? Stephen McKenna, the great translator of the philosopher, Plotinus, spent many years waiting on tables in a restaurant in Dublin in order that he might be free to do his translations. Asked why, he replied, “This is worth a life.”¹⁴

Practical decisions must be made, then, that support this intellectual pattern of experience, this “waiting on truth” that is the call of research.

5. A Moment of Passivity

Bernard Lonergan wrote of following out the deep desire within us that is “the pure detached disinterested desire to know.” But in response to this desire there is also a moment of passivity, of “waiting on truth,” as the French writer, Simone Weil, called it. In a wonderful essay, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God,” Weil wrote of the relationship between study, human love and the love of God. All three demand attentiveness of spirit to “the other;” both demand an element of passivity, of “waiting on the truth” “waiting on love” or “waiting on God.” None are attained by sheer willing or physical force.

In her article Weil links a deepening of the love of God and the love of other people with the deepening ability to “pay attention” that comes with study. In one of her more remarkable quotes on the distinctiveness of attention Weil writes:

Twenty minutes of concentrated, un-tired attention is infinitely better than three hours of the kind of frowning application which leads us to say with a sense of duty done: “I have worked well.”

But, in spite of all appearances, it is also far more difficult. There is something in our soul which has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue. This something is much more closely connected with evil than is the flesh. That is why every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves.¹⁵

Perhaps this is why Bernard Lonergan was such a committed “intellectualist” and why he conceived of the basic sin of human nature, deeper and more destructive than individual and group selfishness, to be “the sin against the light.”¹⁶ It is our common sense orientation to obfuscate philosophical issues or to say they are not important.

According to Weil, even if we do not “succeed” in our study—if we do not “get” the right answer to a mathematical problem - still, by the very fact that we focus our attention on the problem, we grow.

If we have no aptitude or natural taste for geometry this does not mean that our faculty for attention will not be developed by wrestling with a problem or studying a theorem. On the contrary it is almost an advantage. It does not matter much whether we succeed in finding the solution or understanding the proof, although it is important to try really hard to do so.

No genuine effort of attention is wasted.

If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another more mysterious dimension. Without our knowing it or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul.¹⁷

Growth in attentiveness in one area of study, even if we do not “do well” in that area, can influence our attentiveness in other areas as well.

Moreover it may very likely be felt besides in some department of intelligence in no way connected with mathematics. Perhaps he who made the unsuccessful effort will one day be able to grasp the beauty of a line of Racine more vividly on account of it.

Such connections cannot be “proved.” They need to be experienced. But to have the experience, to begin to feel these truths, one must give oneself to the process of study.

Certainties of this kind are experimental. But if we do not believe in them before experiencing them, if at least we do not behave as though we believed in them, we shall never have the experience which leads to such certainties.

This effort at “paying attention” eventually bears abundant fruit.

An Eskimo story explains the origin of light as follows: “In the eternal darkness, the crow, unable to find any food, longed for the light, and the earth was illumined.”

If there is a real desire, if the thing desired is really light, the desire for light produces it. There is a real desire when there is an effort of attention....Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light which is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul.

Weil goes on to distinguish this attentiveness of spirit with other “more pragmatic” desires that might influence a student’s study: the desire to compete, to get a job, to impress others, etc.. Such motivations can easily distract us from attention to the truth and can keep us from analyzing our own mistakes. Most of the time we hide from our mistakes instead of learning from them. What is needed is humility – “a far more precious treasure than all academic progress.”

Attention is not something muscular, contracting our eyebrows and feigning the pose of Rodin’s *The Thinker*.

We often expend this kind of muscular effort on our studies. As it ends by making us tired, we have the impression that we have been working. That is an illusion. Tiredness has nothing to do with work. Work itself is the useful effort, whether it is tiring or not.

Nor is the work that is attentive study a question of “will power.” Unlike in manual labor,

...the intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students, but only caricatures of apprentices who, at the end of their apprenticeship will not even have a trade. It is the part played by joy in our studies that makes of them a preparation for spiritual life, for desire directed towards God is the only power capable of raising the soul. Or rather, it is God alone who comes down and possesses the soul, but desire draws God down.¹⁸

Most of all, attention means “waiting on the truth.” It means keeping our thought detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object.

Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.

All wrong translation, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style and all faulty connection of ideas in compositions and essays, all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily and being prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth. The cause is always that we have wanted to be too active; we have wanted to carry out a search....

We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them.¹⁹

In every school exercise there is a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it.

Weil compares academic work with manual labor.

Happy then are those who pass their adolescence and youth in developing this power of attention. No doubt they are no nearer to goodness than their brothers working in the fields and factories. They are near in a different way. Peasants and workmen possess nearness to God of incomparable savor which is found in the depths of poverty, in the absence of social consideration and in the endurance of long drawn-out sufferings. If however we consider the occupations themselves, studies are nearer to God because of the attention which is their soul. Whoever goes through years of study without developing this attention within himself has lost a great treasure.²⁰

Finally Weil indicates what one must be willing to sacrifice to come to knowledge of the truth.

Academic work is one of those fields which contain a pearl so precious that it is worth while to sell all our possessions, keeping nothing for ourselves, in order to be able to acquire it.²¹

6. Patience

Perhaps the lesson of patience in our academic work can be a lesson we can model for our students. Perhaps we can share with them this reflection from the great geologist-theologian, Teilhard de Chardin.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are, quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability; and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with us.

Our ideas mature gradually; so we must let them grow, let them shape themselves without undue haste.

Don't try to force them on, as though we could be
today what time (that is to say grace and
circumstances acting on our own good will)
will make us tomorrow.
Only God can say what this new spirit gradually
forming within us will be.
We must give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is
leading us; we must accept the anxiety of feeling ourselves in suspense
and incomplete.²²

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1. Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (hereafter *CWL*), Volume 3, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1992), 28-29.
 2. See *Caring about Meaning: Patterns in the Life of Bernard Lonergan*, eds. Pierrot Lambert, Charlotte Tansey, Cathleen Going (Thomas More Institute: Montreal, 1982) vii. Lonergan recalled telling his aunt on a summer day that he was bored. And she replied, Well what do you do when you're bored? You read a book! And so he read his first book, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.
 3. Jerome Miller, *In the Throe of Wonder: Intimations of the Sacred in a Postmodern World* (State University Press of New York: Albany, 1992) 83.
 4. See Bernard Lonergan, "The Subject, *A Second Collection* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1996) 85: "Is this whole process from the nebulae through plants and animals to man, is it good, a true value, something worth while? This question can be answered affirmatively, if and only if one acknowledges God's existence, his omnipotence, and his goodness."
 5. Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection* (Paulist Press: Paulist Press, 1985), 27.
 6. Jane Jacobs, letter to Carroll Keeley, March 18, 1985, printed in Carroll Keeley, "Some Paths Through Jacobs's Thought," *Ethics in Making a Living: The Jane Jacobs Conference*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Scholars Press: Atlanta, GA, 1989), 34-35.
 7. Jane Jacobs, letter to Carroll Keeley, March 18, 1985, printed in Carroll Keeley, "Some Paths Through Jacobs's Thought," *Ethics in Making a Living: The Jane Jacobs Conference*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Scholars Press: Atlanta, GA, 1989), 34-35.
 8. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Frank Sheed (Sheed and Ward: New York, 1942), Book 7, 10, 16.
 9. *Confessions*, Book 7, 1, 2.
 10. *CWL*, Vol. 3, *Insight*, 15.
 11. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1990), 175-196 for Lonergan's description of historical research and the change of mind involved in following out mistaken expectations.
 12. *CWL*, Vol.3, *Insight*, 22. For my own experience of this "startling strangeness," see Richard Liddy, *Startling Strangeness: Reading Lonergan's Insight* (University Press of America: Lanham, MD, 2006).
 13. Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN, 1998) 29.
 14. Confided to his private journal on this 36th birthday. Cf. Philip McShane, "Features of Generalized Empirical Method and the Actual Context of Economics," in *Creativity and Method: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Matthew Lamb (Marquette University Press: Milwaukee, 1981), 544.
 15. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (Harper and Row: New York, 1951) 56. Previously she had written: "From this point of view it is perhaps even more useful to contemplate our stupidity than our sin. Consciousness of sin gives us the feeling that we are evil, and a kind of pride sometimes finds a place in it. When we force ourselves to fix the gaze, not only of our eyes but of our souls, upon a school exercise in which we have failed through sheer stupidity, a sense of mediocrity is borne in upon us with irresistible evidence. No knowledge is more to be desired. If we can arrive at knowing this truth with all our souls we shall be well established on the right foundation."

16. See Lonergan, *CWL*, Vol. 3, *Insight*, Chapter Seven, “Common Sense as Object,” on the general bias.
17. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 52.
18. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 55.
19. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 56-57.
20. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 58.
21. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 59.
22. I do not have the source of this citation; it was given me by a friend, Andre Delbecq.